

Assessing Causes for the Poor State of Women's Rights in Egypt



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Abstract

The Arab Republic of Egypt is among the more culturally progressive countries within the Middle East. Influenced heavily by globalization through its close relationship with the United States, Egypt tends to take a more open stance to many issues; a simple walk down most any street in Cairo reveals the deep intrusion of Western culture into Egyptian society. However, despite Egypt's alignment with more liberal values than its neighbors, women's rights abuses are common and Egyptian women's participation in the economy and politics are minimal. The oppressed position of women in Egypt has a strong cultural basis that is essentially Egyptian in origin, takes expression in economic and political forms which subsequently reinforce the foundational cultural bias, and is justified in some cases through highly localized interpretations of Islam.

Analytical Framework and Methodology

Determining causes for a social phenomenon is an inherently complex process, as each force affects, reinforces, and is affected by one other in a dynamic and recursive process of social formation. Furthermore, each force is itself an amalgamation of a variety of different sub-forces or contributing forces. By separating the underlying forces that determine the position of women within Egyptian society into categories based upon the general forces that shape the various phenomena, we can proceed to make informed judgements regarding precisely what gives rise to the various outcomes of said societal positions, and precisely how the underlying forces as well as the general forces contribute. Here, it is necessary to separate the forces into (a) economic, (b) political, (c) religious, and (d) cultural, and separate assessments given into categories of high, moderate-high, moderate-low, and low.

Addressing Pitfalls of Cultural Imperialism

Since the subject matter of this analysis borders on elements of cultural imperialism or Islamophobia due to its analytical approach to culture, it is necessary to be clear about the specific criteria of judgement used to come to determinations as to the impact of the different forces involved. The purpose and methodology of this paper is not to and does not identify ways in which Egyptian culture is inferior to another. Rather, the purpose is to identify specific ways in which culture reinforces the abuses of women's rights to provide specific suggestions to solutions. Egypt's economic and political sustainability over the long-term is inseparable from the way in which it empowers or limits the second half of its population; consequently, the advancement of women's rights as advocated by this author is not only based off of concepts of what is right, but also on concepts of advocating for pragmatic solutions.

Sexual Harassment and Abuse

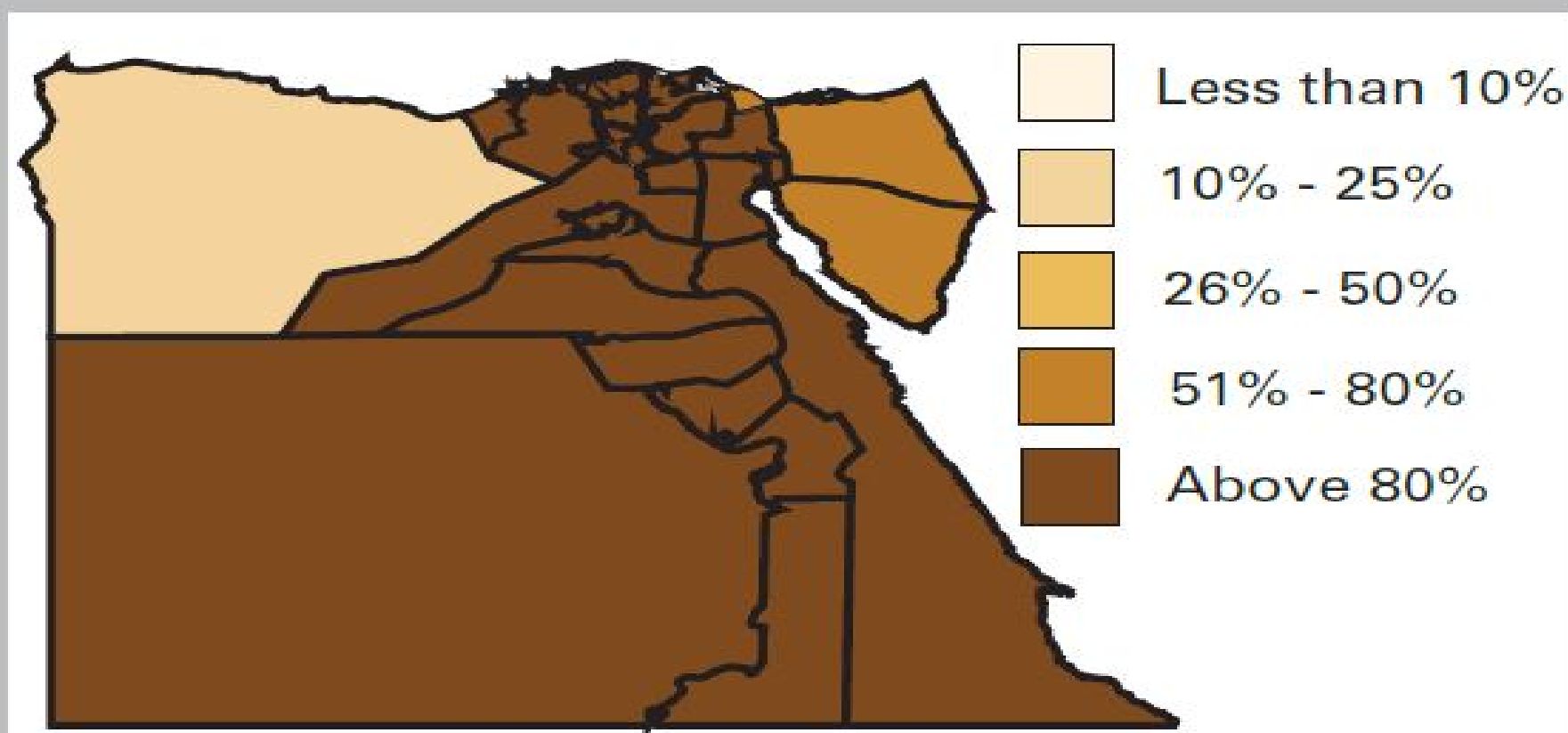
Summary of Problem-

According to UN Women, 99.3% of women reported sexual harassment. Of those women, 96.5% report being touched, 95.9% report being harassed through language, 90.9% report rape, 86.7% report being stalked or pursued on street. When asked about frequency of abuse 49.2% reported daily, 19.2% reported weekly, and 7.3% reported monthly, while 20.7% reported rarely but more than once. 68.9% responded all times of day, 12.5% report it taking place between 12pm-5pm, 11.9% report it taking place between 6pm-10pm, 9.8% report it occurring after 10pm, and 5.1% report it occurring from 6am-11am. 48.9% of women report that sexual harassment has increased after the January 25th revolution, while 44% report little change in frequency or rate.

Causal Assessments-

Culture & politics assessed as high, role of religion assessed as moderate-low, role of economics as low. Culturally, acceptability and universality of abuse points to strong cultural basis. Incidence of abuse across economic, political, and religious lines. Politically, historic lack of criminalization of harassment; first law passed only in 2014, enforcement of said law minimal. Law itself characterized by extremely narrow definition and high burden of proof. Religiously, mixed messages from Qur'an and Hadith offer clear condemnation on abuse outside the home, little guidance on inside. Nature of Qu'ran as word of God makes cultural/time period adjustments difficult. Economically, harassment consistent across socio-economic lines, levels of harassment consistent outside of current economic downturn.

Percentage of girls and women aged 15 to 49 years who have undergone FGM/C, by governorate



Female Genital Mutilation

Description of Problem-

Rates beginning a slow decline, with 95% of women affected in 2007 to 87% of women affected in 2015. Female genital mutilation within Egypt exhibits slight variance among groups. According to statistics gathered by the Egyptian department for Demographics and Health in 2008, when FGM rates for Egypt as a whole stood at 91%, 92% of Muslim women aged 15-49 had experienced FGM, compared to 74% of Christian women. Within the same age group, 85% of women in urban areas had been mutilated compared to 96% of women in rural areas, while 95% of the poorest (first) quintile of women had suffered mutilation, compared to 96%, 95%, 92% and 78% in the second, third, fourth, and richest (fifth) percentiles respectively. Three governorates in Egypt differ dramatically in terms of prevalence of FGM in relation to other governorates within Egypt. Whereas all other governorates are characterized by over 80% rates of incidence of FGM, the governorate of Matrouh has a curiously low rate of 21% of FGM, rates of incidence for North and South Sinai lies somewhere between 51-80%. Comparing incidence of FGM in Egypt to lingual dispersions, we see that the areas of low incidence of FGM correspond to separate lingual groups. In case of Red Sea governorate, where the Badawi cultural group remains prevalent but FGM rates remain high, urbanization rates may have affected ability of Badawi group to retain independent cultural identity within Egypt as they have within Sinai provinces; furthermore, lack of geographic proximity of lingual group to outside populations, as in case of Sinai and Matrouh, may further contribute to apparent cultural homogenization.

Causal Assessments-

Culture assessed as high, economics & politics as moderate, religion as low. Culturally, close link between practice of FGM and lingual groups, discrepancies between theoretical and practical religion further underscores cultural origin. Politically, outlawed only in 2007, enforcement uneven. Existing punishments not sever. Economically, practiced primarily to ensure daughter's economic futures, with non-mutilated daughters seen as impure or unmarriedable. Religiously, practiced across both religions, explicitly condemned by Islamic establishment in Egypt. Practice of FGM non-existent across Middle East.

Political & Economic Participation

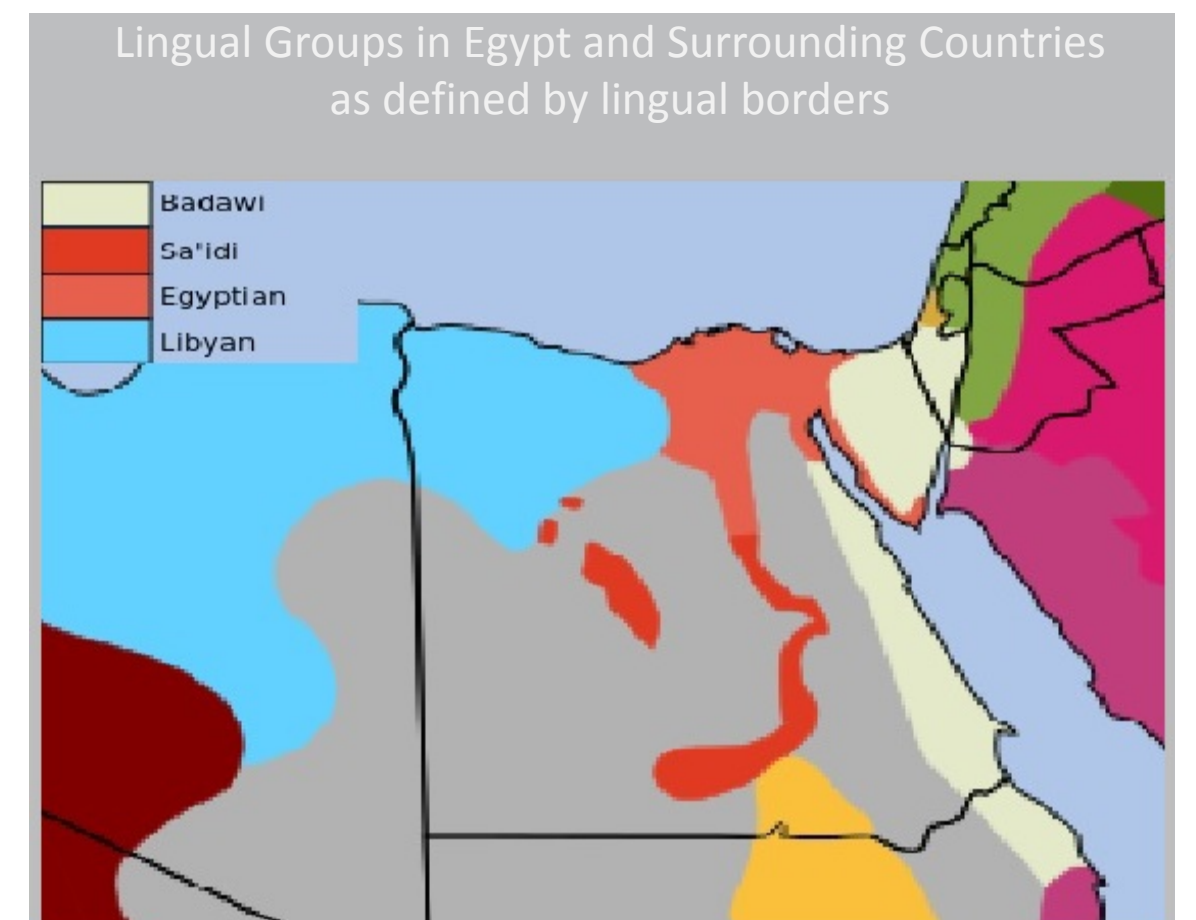
Summary of Problem-

Overall, in the World Economic Forum's (WEF) gender gap report, Egypt ranks 132nd out of 144 countries for gender disparity. Quota systems themselves have been inconsistent, reaching a height of 8% in 1972 and falling to 0.22% in 1990. Following the Arab Spring, elections in 2012 once again dropped the quota system, and women won less than 2% of seats available despite record numbers of women competing. As of 2015, female members in parliament stood at 87 seats out of 596 members, or just 14.59% of the body. Participation in the economy has been likewise limited, exhibiting a consistent pattern of being more than twice as high as male unemployment. According to the World Bank, female unemployment stood in 2014 (the latest date for which the World Bank offers statistics) stood at 27.8%.

Causal Assessments-

Culture, economics, religion assessed as high, politics as moderate-high. Culturally, Consistent sole reliance of women's participation in government on quota systems strongly indicative of cultural basis, cultural concepts of role of women and high incidence of sexual harassment strong factor in lack of economic engagement. Economically, poor engagement of women in workforce strongly reinforces lack of participation in government and leadership positions. Religiously, descriptions of role of woman in relation to power, and the legal superiority advocated for men over women. Politically, Egypt has a history of an active state on behalf of women; however, support has varied over time, and has not addressed economic engagement.

السكان				
تقدير اعداد السكان طبقا للمحافظات (حضر وريف) 2015/1/1				
Population Estimates By Governorate (Urban/Rural) 1/1/2015*				
Unit -No.	الوحدة : بالعدد			
Governorate	% حضر	جملة	ريف	حضر
	Urban	Total	Rural	Urban
Cairo	100.0	9278 441	0	9278 441
Alexandria	98.8	4812 186	56698	4755 488
Port-Said	100.0	666599	0	666599
Suez	100.0	622859	0	622859
Damania	98.7	1339 848	815244	513599
Luxor	37.8	1147 058	713422	433636
Red Sea	95.1	345775	17062	328713
EiWadi ElGidid	48.0	225416	117180	108236
Matrouh	70.6	447846	131841	316005
North Sinai	60.2	434781	133095	301686
South Sinai	51.1	167426	81924	85502
Total	42.7	87963 276	50384 188	37579 088
Egypt in Figures: 2015				
مصر في ارقام: 2015				



Recommendations

- 1)The Egyptian government needs to make enforcement mechanisms for existing anti-FGM and sexual harassment laws more robust.
- 2)President Sisi's administration must roll back restrictions placed on local NGOs and civil society groups, who are crucial partners in realizing social change.
- 3)The state needs to address underlying issues of economic stagnation in order to create opportunities for employment for Egypt's unemployed men and women.
- 4)The Egyptian state should take advantage of its close connections with the religious establishment and launch a long-term campaign towards ending sexual harassment.
- 5)Citizens need to encourage those affected by sexual harassment and FGM to utilize the laws that exist to protect them, and elect representatives who will fight for the rights of women.
- 6)Citizens should report physicians suspected of conducting FGM to local authorities.
- 7)The religious establishment needs to actively seek to break the false perceptions of the permissibility of both FGM and sexual harassment in the eyes of Islam by engaging with local religious community leaders in dialogue. Furthermore, the Coptic Church must issue a statement to all of its communities explicitly condemning the practice of FGM.
- 8)Entrepreneurs should create businesses that promote gender equality in employment when possible and have clear anti-harassment policies to prevent sexual harassment at work.
- 9)Students need to become activists within the contexts of their universities and campaign to reform student conduct codes to include strong provisions against sexual harassment.
- 10)"Netizens" need to continue to keep discussion of the issues active within the realm of social media to maintain high levels of social consciousness and awareness of the issues .

Findings

- 1)The oppressed position of women in Egypt has a strong cultural basis that is essentially Egyptian in origin, takes expression in economic and political forms which subsequently reinforce the foundational cultural bias, and is justified in some cases through highly localized interpretations of Islam.
- 2)Rates of FGM in Egypt seem linked to dispersions of lingual groups.
- 3)Changing Egyptian culture to emphasize the equality of women is not something that needs to be started, but rather needs to be supported and continued; positive trends are result of an increasing willingness to openly discuss what would have been considered taboo 10-20 years ago.
- 4)Instances in which Islam is directly involved in justifications of women's treatment are at times resultant from lack of clarity relating to the treatment of women described in the Qur'an, at times resultant from lack of harmony between religion as theorized and religion as practiced.

Questions for Further Research

- 1)To what degree are the findings regarding the correlation between FGM and lingual groups statistically significant, both within Egypt and across Central and West Africa?
- 2)To what degree are the findings relating the correlation between FGM and lingual groups to urbanization statistically significant? To what degree is FGM within each governorate concentrated in urban areas?
- 3)What does the 90.9% incidence of rape as reported by UN Women mean? What are the definitional parameters that were used by which to construct the question for participants of the survey conducted?
- 4)To what extent do Egyptian entrepreneurs view advancing women's economic engagement as a priority? What has the Egyptian government done to encourage entrepreneurs to do so?